

## COVID-19

# Recommended practices for doctoral students in navigating and engaging in online courses during COVID-19 pandemic: A personal narrative from a doctoral candidate

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The ongoing COVID-19 global pandemic continues to impact both our doctoral coursework and lab work. The face-to-face and in-person doctoral courses become exclusively online, and as a graduate student, I feel like we need to be adaptive, flexible, and mindful about our participation, interaction, and communication with our faculty members. As Ph.D. students, we must remember that our professors are also human beings who have likely never seen a worldwide epidemic of this magnitude. As a result, we are shifting and adapting to this new normal. I am a Bangladeshi doctoral student at the Kent State University. I also work as a teaching assistant for undergraduate courses. I will offer a few tips and suggestions that help me navigate both the educator and the doctoral student role positively.

I had three weeks remaining in the Spring 20 semester when I first submitted this personal narrative. My final papers were due in two weeks, and group and/or class presentations, as well as final tests, would take place in the first week of May 2020. It might feel overwhelming at times. However, I make every effort to keep a weekly calendar. Having a weekly calendar is reassuring and ensures my commitment, especially since all my academic engagements are virtual and online. I regard my weeks as typical academic weeks, in which I wake up early, dress appropriately, put on my trainers, and go to the university for my lectures and other responsibilities. I am still at home and communicating with my peers and faculty members via virtual means; this ritual of wearing my trainers helps me stay focused and grounded for my academic commitments.

In addition, as an international doctoral student, I acknowledge that I do feel unwarranted emotions; I

miss my parents and my family members from my hometown in Bangladesh. But there nothing much I could do to change the current circumstances. I try my best to call and stay connected with my family members daily, maybe just for 10–15 min. It offers me a sense of belongingness and connectedness. I would suggest that finding a friend, classmate, or neighbor and maintaining regular virtual communication is immensely helpful. If you have a classmate from your cohort or department or just a graduate student who is also taking graduate courses like you, it helps to build mutual accountability and rapport. During online class participation, being mindful and respectful are strongly recommended. At times, the internet connection and/or the digital device might not work properly during class time. Rather than freaking out, I would recommend sending an email and explain your current limitations. We are in this together, and both educators and students are trying their best to participate, work, and complete their necessary tasks. Effective and clear communication is strongly recommended. I try to be mindful and respectful about emailing my professors in terms of timing, expecting a quick response, and finding a functional solution for the issue.

Finally, I would strongly recommend finding fun and relaxing hobbies. As doctoral students, we like and appreciate our creative outlets, like presenting our papers/posters, participating in conferences, workshops, and making ongoing scientific contributions. Now, the situation is different. And I am quite sure our faculty members are aware of our struggles. So rather than putting all this psychological pressure on ourselves, we need to find fun and engaging hobbies. I try to cook with my brother and a



few friends in a virtual session. We cook our dinner in a virtual video session together for 30–45 min and catch up with each other. This is so important for us to keep an active social life and to interact with each other. At the same time, I would also suggest trying not to have extra expectations from our peers and/or family members. Everyone is battling their struggles and problems, so we need to be very observant and careful about our virtual interactions.

I would like to share few tips that usually works for me. As doctoral students, most of us do not have money, struggling financially, and worried about the next semester, grades, food, rent, utility bills, and related expenses. There are various student organizations and food pantries available on our university campuses. Again, I would like to emphasize clear and effective communication with our faculty members and mentors. As an international doctoral student in a public Midwestern Research University, I was honestly unaware of various meaningful and helpful resources available to us. The graduate studies office and the international office helped us finding the proper outlets to get more focused support and adequate resources. If we do not communicate and clearly and articulate our struggles and perceived barriers in our doctoral journey to our academic staff, mentors, and faculty members, it just gets more complicated, and it would have a compounding negative impact on our mental health and overall well-being. I highly advise you to contact your mentors, advisers, faculty members, and the international office. They are also figuring out the better solutions and options for dealing with this unusual scenario; simultaneously, they are aware of more specialized and focused resources that may help us address our difficulties and overcome our challenges. I would like to finish my reflection by saying that we will get better together. I have bulleted a few points here to summarize a few key aspects currently working for me.

The following are some of the things that are working for me:

1. Make a weekly calendar and try to stick to it as much as possible.
2. Approach my online classes and other activities as if they were face-to-face meetings and do my best to be prepared (I would dress accordingly and wear my shoes; it gives me hope and assurance that I am in the classroom).
3. Making connections with my cohort's peers, classmates, and friends (this helps me to ground and focus on my studies, assignments, final deliverables for the coursework).
4. Maintaining an active social life (I would have a daily half-hour dinner cooking session with my friends and family members is immensely helpful).
5. Effective and clear communication (state and share your concerns and issues with your faculty members as early as possible helps speed up finding a mutually agreeable solution).
6. In virtual classrooms and other virtual settings, practice mindfulness and mutual respect (we are all struggling and trying to find better ways to navigate this unexpected situation, be kind and patient).

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